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ABSTRACT

A framework for discussing the issues associated with language policy in the United States is offered, highlighting the history of the country's diverse language groups and language policies. It is proposed that language politics, and often the policies themselves, reflect the social relations between groups within a society. The history of language groups looks at the distribution of major colonial languages, the influx of immigrant languages, and the incorporation of indigenous populations. Current and projected language diversity is examined. Two periods in the history of language policy are delineated, the first dating from the founding of the United States through the first quarter of the 20th century and the second from the end of the first quarter to the present day. Tolerance-oriented and oppression-oriented policies in the first period and their results are discussed. More restrictive language policies are also examined. Issues in the current debate over an official language are noted, including the constitutionality of proclaiming English as the official language, concern for the public status of non-English languages and their promotion, and interpretation of status legislation. Three winning essays in a 1987 contest on the importance of being bilingual are appended. (MSE)

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Official Languages in the United States: Policies, Polemics, and Politics

by

Reynaldo F. Macías

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Official Languages in the United States: Policies, Polemics, and Politics

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and
Scholar of the Tomás Rivera Center

A keynote address presented at the
Fifth Annual National Hispanic Media Conference
Los Angeles, California
April 25, 1987

Good afternoon. I trust the conference is going well and that all of you are enjoying our city of Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, de Porciúncula.

When I was invited to come before you and speak, I was asked to do two things: present a history of language policies in the United States and provide background for the panel discussion taking place this afternoon on the topic "The USA--Do We Need an Official Language?"

In order to do this I would like to offer a framework for discussing the issues, a brief history of the diverse language groups, and a brief history of language policies in the United States.

A Useful Framework

Useful frameworks begin with definitions of key concepts; in the case of language policy the following terms are fundamental:

- language issues--areas of contention among individuals or groups about language, including literacy;
- language policy and planning--official or authoritative decisions about the status, use, or structure of language (where status determines official acceptance; use determines which language is spoken when, where, how, and by whom; and structure-form determines the variety of the language and how one should speak it);
- language policymakers and planners--officials with the authority to make language policies;

- language strategists--cultural and social elites and groups who influence, or attempt to influence, language issues and policies; and
- language politics--the interaction between strategists and policymakers around a language issue.

A somewhat more important part of this framework, which is supported by a review of the research, is that language politics, and very often the policies themselves, reflect the social relations between groups in a society. One popular definition of a standard language exemplifies this very well: A standard language is that variety of a language spoken by the group controlling the army, the navy, and the air force.

A Brief History of Language Diversity in the United States

Although the United States is principally a monolingual country, given that over 200 million persons in the nation are English monolinguals, a history of multilingualism does exist. During the colonial period, over 500 Native American, or indigenous, languages were spoken in what is today the United States. Only about 200 of these are still in use.

The major colonial languages were English, German, French, and Spanish, with a little Dutch, Russian, and several other languages thrown in around the continent. Unlike most of the other language groups, however, Spanish was first spoken as a second language, and then natively, by many more peoples than the 300,000 Spaniards who came to Middle América during the colonial period. Ten percent of the British colonial population was

Black, and the domestication of slave labor forced Africans to speak English as a matter of survival. Otherwise, colonial national-ethnic-language groups tended to settle in language islands throughout the continent. One-third of the population in Pennsylvania on the eve of the American Revolution, for example, spoke German, as did much of Virginia, Maryland, and other parts of the British colonies.

What are referred to as the immigrant languages arrived during the national period, primarily from 1880 through the first quarter of the 20th century. Most of these languages originated in Eastern and Southern Europe, although small numbers spoke Chinese, Japanese, and several Pacific Islander languages on the west coast.

It is important to keep in mind how these various language groups became part of the United States, especially after the birth of the nation. Through manifest destiny, the version of the demographic imperative reigning in the 18th and 19th centuries, Indian country was first circumscribed by treaty and then incorporated into the nation by default or fiat. From the east coast base of the thirteen states, the country expanded in the following steps:

- 1803: the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory, which covered 1 million square miles with approximately 38,000 French speakers;
- 1819: Spain ceded all her territory east of the Mississippi River and renounced her right to the Oregon

Territory. Florida had 38,700 square miles with approximately 5,000 Spanish speakers;

- 1846: the United States claimed the Oregon Territory, gaining 286,500 square miles;
- 1848: the United States acquired 945,000 square miles in the war against México and approximately 100,000 Spanish speakers and 100,000 Amerindians speaking various languages.
- 1853: the Gadsden Purchase added about 45,000 square miles of what now forms part of Arizona and New México.
- 1867: the United States purchased Alaska, including about 500 Russian speakers and 15,000 Eskimos and Indians;
- 1897: the United States acquired Hawaii, with about 39,000 Hawaiian speakers and 25,000 Japanese speakers;
- 1898: the United States intervened in the Cuban war of independence from Spain and claimed Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and more than 1 million Spanish speakers.

Amerindians, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans became incorporated into the United States by virtue of war, unlike the immigrants, who joined the union voluntarily. The social relations between the conqueror and the conquered that were cemented during these periods of expansion were extremely hostile, and the symbols of this antagonism included race and language. What is more, close to two-thirds of the current 300 million square miles of U.S. territory was once under the Spanish flag, and the Spanish

language therefore forms part of its linguistic political history. After each major acquisition, non-English languages enjoyed official status for varying periods of time.

Estimates of the current language diversity of the nation provide us with a picture of how effective the U.S. social absorption of certain language groups has been. According to the 1980 U.S. census, about 22 million persons actually spoke a language other than English in 1980, which means that over 200 million persons in the United States were English monolingual. Of the 22 million people who spoke non-English languages, most were bilingual and could also speak English. Of these 22 million, about 49 percent were Spanish speakers. Among Latinos, about 17 percent spoke only Spanish, 23 percent spoke only English, and 70 percent spoke both Spanish and English.

Current projections of ethnic groups and languages indicate that the number of people who speak non-English languages, particularly Spanish, in the United States will probably keep growing. The total Latino population in the United States was projected to increase from 14.6 million in 1980 to between 23.0 and 26.9 million in the year 2000. With the addition of Puerto Rico we estimate that the United States will have about 22 million Spanish speakers in the year 2000. A look at the future of Spanish in the nation must include an analysis of what is taking place in Latino América, including Puerto Rico. One United Nations study of population growth in Latino América indicates that the Latin American Spanish-speaking population will grow from 242 million in 1980 to 397 million in the year

2000. Latin America's population is growing faster than the English-speaking population in the northern hemisphere.

Language Policies in the United States

The history of language policies in the United States can be divided into two main periods: the first dating from the founding of the country through the first quarter of this century, and the second from the first quarter of the century to the present day.

In the first period there were two kinds of language policies, tolerance-oriented policies and repression-oriented policies, each directed at different language groups. Tolerance-oriented policies were aimed at the communities speaking German, French, and other colonial languages. Repression-oriented language policies were directed at Africans, Mexicans, Amerindians, and Puerto Ricans. Colonial language groups like the Germans were often allowed to use their languages freely. These populations were large, isolated, dense, and scattered throughout the new nation.

Indigenous and other racial language groups were not tolerated in quite the same way. The Compulsory Ignorance Laws of the 18th and 19th centuries are examples of repressive language policies. These laws were directed primarily at people who dared to teach English literacy to Africans in the South. A 1740 law in South Carolina is cited as the first instance of a Compulsory Ignorance Law:

> And whereas the having of slaves taught to write or suffering them to be employed in writing may be attending with great inconveniences;

> Be it enacted that all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach, or cause any slave or slaves to be taught to write or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write; every such person or persons shall for every offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.

Similar laws were adopted in 1819 in Virginia, in 1823 in Mississippi, in 1830 in Louisiana, in 1831 in North Carolina, in 1832 in Alabama, and in 1847 in Missouri. Here we have an example, in the late 18th, early 19th century, of language policy legislation that is directed at a group not generally viewed as a language minority and that determines their access to social benefits, constrains their opportunity structures, and affects the development of their English language proficiency.

Another example comes from the 1867 Indian Peace Commission report on recommendations for the "permanent removal of the causes of Indian hostility":

> In the difference of language today lies two-thirds of our trouble. Schools should be established which children would be required to attend; their barbarous dialects would be blotted out and the English language substituted.

These two kinds of language policies coexisted throughout the 19th century. In response to the Eastern and Southern European immigration at the turn of the century and to the strength of nativist groups, the nature of language politics

changed. The nativist groups first elevated language politics and policies from the local level to that of the state and then of the nation, breaking the previous geographic isolation of the language groups. Their initial strategy was to prohibit the use of non-English languages, particularly as the medium of instruction in the schools. The courts found that such prohibitions violated other rights and declared them illegal. The strategy of the nativists was to mandate the use of English as the language of instruction in the schools. It was just a hop, skip, and a short jump to policies declaring English the only language of instruction. Even foreign language classes could not be offered before the 6th grade or so in order to assure initial school contact in English. Other kinds of English language requirements were adopted, which conditioned access to social and political benefits on English language ability: voting on English literacy tests, naturalization on English verbal ability, and barbering in New York on English proficiency tests. Whereas in 1890 only a handful of states had language policies making English the language of instruction or requiring English literacy in order to vote, by 1925 over thirty states had such laws.

These strategies were so successful in socially controlling immigrant language groups that tolerance-oriented policies disappeared and the severity of the repressive policies was no longer necessary. Because benefits were conditioned on knowledge of English, these policies were restrictive rather than

repressive. We have had restrictive policies for most of the twentieth century.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the changes in our civil rights laws promoted a slight revision of these policies: the elimination of English literacy tests for voting, the right to have schools take into account the English language proficiency of students in educating them, the right to have a court interpreter in federal criminal trials for limited English proficient and deaf defendants, and the temporary use of bilingual electoral services and ballots to help remedy voting discrimination against Mexicans, Amerindians, and Chinese based on language.

The changes around the turn of the century that led to the restrictive language policies of the 20th century presaged the strategies of the current English-only and English-first movements in the United States. A similar confluence of interests also exists between the individuals and groups who promote these movements today and those groups who promoted repressive language policies in the 19th century. Nativists and xenophobics are involved in the leadership and membership of these groups, although not all people who have contributed monies to them (and then been called members) should be painted with the same brush.

One of the founders of the organization known as U.S. English was active early in the environmental movement, which at that time was particularly concerned with the overpopulation of our planet. As he looked at population growth in the United States, he came to believe that overpopulation would result from

over-immigration. This over-immigration was principally the result of illegal immigration. Because of their underground social status, illegal immigrants threatened the cultural fabric of the nation by resisting assimilation to the mainstream. Moving away from environmental activities, he formed the immigration reform organization called FAIR (Forum for American Immigration Reform). Seeing a greater threat to the cultural politics of the nation led him to help form U.S. English. As we view the attempts to revise language policies, we see that language issues are intimately tied to immigrant and ethnic relations and politics. For many in the English-only movement, language issues have become a symbol for political issues of social control, prompting them to generate their own version of U.S. political, immigrant, and language histories to justify their ends.

These revised histories, in fact, then become points of contention in the polemics over language and culture and, thus, language policies. The following represent some of these points of contention over language issues:

- *Constitutionality of English as the official language*. The persons who founded this nation and developed the constitution recognized the practical need to unite diverse political and language groups. Their design for the new nation was based on a unity built on political ideals, not cultural sameness. This perspective is being turned on its head by the English-only movement,

which promotes language sameness as the basis for political unity;

- *Concern for the public status of non-English languages and their promotion.* The English-only movement often states that non-English language use in the private sector is acceptable and that their only concern is its use in the public sector. Public sector use is touted as the promotion of non-English languages, particularly Spanish. The history of other, earlier nativist movements has not borne out this generosity. Nativist movements have always tried to influence the educational policies of, for example, private as well as public schools;
- *Interpretation of status legislation.* Many of the proposed amendments to state constitutions are one-line stipulations declaring English to be the official language of the state. Few argue the de facto status of English as the national language or assert that making it the official language would change much. Many, however, relate language policies of **status** to those of **use** and **structure**. Many proposed amendments start with the stipulation of status and then explicitly interpret it as a prohibition of the use of non-English languages. Instead of becoming a common language policy, it becomes an exclusive language policy. The interest in promoting a common language is legitimate, but when promoting a common language

> sacrifices the ability of a government to communicate with all its citizenry, the participatory basis of democracy is sacrificed.

Contemporary language politics are not very different from the strategies used by the nativist groups at the turn of the century. The language issue focuses first on the need for English, then on the prohibition of non-English languages, and finally on the variety of English permitted, that is, the issue of structure and form. Whose English ought to be included? Court cases involving vernacular Black English have treated the role of standard English and vernacular Black English in teaching (Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School Children v. Michigan Board of Education) and in the discriminatory results of standardized testing (Larry P. v. Riles). Other cases have examined allegations of discriminatory hiring based on the use of non-English accents by bilingual or other teachers.

These perceptions of language use affect our literacy policies as well. I am reminded of an article on literacy policies and power that was published several years ago. The author began by describing a literacy policy in which the Navy provided reading instruction for enlisted personnel and writing instruction for officers. The obvious assumption expressed in this policy is that enlisted personnel don't need productive language skills. Tying this assumption to the hierarchical power relations represented by the two levels within the military reproduces the unequal distribution of literacy resources within our society. The issues of language policies and politics must

take into account not only cross-language issues and politics, but within-language issues and politics as well.

This is not idle crystal gazing, but an examination of current events and actions that should concern reasonable people throughout the nation who are interested in language and language policies. These issues reflect the social relations among groups in our society, the obvious dimension being the power relationships among groups and the question of whose privileges are being protected by which language policies.

I would like to end by sharing with you portions of the winning essay in the secondary school division of the 1987 National Association for Bilingual Education essay contest. This was a national contest with the theme "All Americans Should Be Bilingual."

> Tradition, in the simplest of terms, is the handing down of the past to posterity. It is a vital aspect in life, one that forms strong relationships between those who share it. Many consider language to be a tradition. It is looked upon as the symbol of one's life, culture, and heritage. Many hold fast to their language and would be hesitant to understand another. Yet, to be bound by tradition, is the way of the mindless and enslaved. To be inspired by it to achieve further heights, is the way of genius. . . .
>
> To be restricted by language is to deprive oneself of what America has to offer. To learn and understand another

> language is the key to opportunity and true freedom. Language is knowledge, and development of another knowledge would not only be an improvement in American society, but a maturing of the world as a whole. The path towards bilinguality would be a betterment of life, not to mention a progress within oneself. We must all constantly strive to reach new heights and achieve greater goals. If bilinguality is essential to doing so, then so be it.

The author is Theoddeus deVera Millan, an 11th grader at Chula Vista High School in California. I hope his comments have underscored the point that languages are dynamic and vital; that to know one is a uniquely human gift and to know two is to be doubly gifted. Our language policy deliberations must take these points into account.

Appendix A

N A B E E S S A Y W I N N E R S, 1 9 8 7

FIRST PLACE WINNER: Carmen Santana, 4th grade
P.S. 172K, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Ms. Kim West and Mr. A. Mateo, teachers

The Importance of Being Bilingual

Bilingualism: French and English, Korean and Vietnamese, Spanish and Italian, Polish and sign language, it doesn't matter. The most important thing is that whichever two languages you speak, you are better prepared for today and the changing tomorrow. The key to being prepared is to know the language of those around you, be it at home or at work, within the boundaries of America or outside. Knowing the language allows you to communicate or to compete in a very competitive world.

It is extremely important to know two or more languages, especially when looking for necessities in life like education, jobs, and housing. If you know two or more languages, you can then meet and interact with interesting people. Your world becomes less blurry and complicated; you know the language of the land.

America is known as a democracy, a melting pot. It is this land that has welcomed many without asking them to give up their heritage. America welcomed them knowing who they were and accepted them as they were.

I love America because it is the "university of the world."

FIRST PLACE WINNER: Sharon Hernández, 6th grade
P.S. 65, Bronx, N.Y.
Mr. J. Santiago, teacher

All Americans Should Be Bilingual

Why should all Americans be bilingual? I have asked myself this question time and again and I have come to the conclusion that to be bilingual is one of the most all-American experiences we can aspire to achieve. Certainly, bilingualism is in our best national interest.

Bilingualism implies a respect for ethnic diversity in America. This is in keeping with our national ideals of freedom, equality, justice, and human dignity.

Through the learning of the important languages of the world, representatives of which form our multi-ethnic and multi-cultural nation, we will be moving in the direction of clearing the cobwebs of ignorance from the past. Citizens that can understand and appreciate the cultural and language ways of others, also make a step forward in doing away with fear of the unknown.

This fear has been the cause of untold injustices throughout our history. Language and cultural ignorance have hidden themselves under the ugly cloak of discrimination because of an individual's religion, race, sex, or national origin. Such intolerance is fundamentally against our basic national ideals. Many of these sins of the past and the present could be erased if people had a better understanding of each other. This, bilingualism is prepared to do.

When individuals are exposed to bilingual/bicultural experiences, they will be able to develop a stronger self-esteem and pride in both cultures. In effect, I see a stronger American resulting from this language and cultural learning effort. He/she will come out of this crucible not as the tongue-tied, "ugly" American of old, but as the fluent and wiser one of the future.

America will be more unified as Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, European Americans, Afro Americans, and Asian Americans become less fearful of each other as the result of a better understanding of each other's culture, value systems, life styles, and languages.

Bilingualism, then, can be the new melting pot of the future. One, not where the ethnic groups lose their individual identities, but where they become a culturally unified group advancing America's ideals through respect, understanding, and esteem.

FIRST PLACE WINNER: Theoddeus deVera Millan, 11th grade
Chula Vista High School, Chula Vista, CA
Mrs. Ruth Broudy, bilingual teacher

All Americans Should Be Bilingual

Tradition, in the simplest of terms, is the handing down of the past to posterity. It is a vital aspect in life, one that forms strong relationships between those who share it. Many consider language to be a tradition. It is looked upon as the symbol of one's life, culture, and heritage. Many hold fast to their language and would be hesitant to understand another. Yet to be bound by tradition is the way of the mindless and enslaved. To be inspired by it to achieve further heights is the way of genius.

America is a country of many nationalities, a union of culture, ideas, and philosophies. We live in a world shared by brothers, yet many close their eyes and minds to their ways. One must realize that keeping an open mind is extremely important for growth. Without it, one would merely perceive according to limits formed by such restrictions and a restricted mind is a wasted one. Many find it easier to follow paths already made instead of creating and exploring. They feel so safe and secure in knowing only their language that they tend to neglect those of others. To do this is to deny knowledge and to accept ignorance.

In American society there exists many barriers, obstacles of differences, whether physical or mental, or opinion or nationality. Ironically, it is this very same society that creates these barriers and holds within it the ability to overcome them. To be bilingual is extremely necessary in the conquering of such barriers. In a bilingual society, there would exist a common bond which allows one to associate with the other. It brings people a step closer to the acceptance of one another, something which could possibly result in the end of prejudice. It permits one to rise as limits may allow. Bilinguality may not insure material success, but its rewards are not measured in dollars and cents. It is prosperity of the mind.

Speaking another language is not the mere essence of bilinguality. Words mean nothing if there is not understanding behind them. Learning a language is not just an acquisition of new words, but an enlightenment of culture. Bilinguality isn't merely accepting and learning. It is understanding. Imagine the wonders that language could bring. Eyes would look out into a larger world and ears would hear and understand so much more. Language, given a chance, can do all this.

To be restricted by language is to deprive oneself of what America has to offer. To learn and understand another language is the key to opportunity and true freedom. Language is knowledge, and development of another language would not only be

an improvement in American society, but a maturing of the world as a whole. The path towards bilinguality would be a betterment of life, not to mention a progress within oneself. We must all constantly strive to reach new heights and achieve greater goals. If bilinguality is essential in doing so, then so be it.

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